

The British camps



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Today, the expression "concentration camp" evokes the horrors of Nazi Germany, conjuring up black-and-white images of Auschwitz and Belsen. But Germans were neither the first nation to make use of concentration camps nor the last.

Both during and immediately after the war, concentration camps and slave-labor camps operated throughout the United Kingdom. A year after World War II's end, British agriculture only functioned thanks to slave labor. In May 1945, while high-ranking SS officers were preparing for trial at Nuremberg, 385,000 enslaved workers were held behind barbed wire across the British Isles; thousands more were arriving every week. At the time, they made up over 25 percent of the land workforce.

The British had been early adopters of these exceedingly useful establishments. During the Second Boer War (1899–1902), they set up a network of camps in which conditions were so grim that over twenty-two thousand children under the age of sixteen died of starvation and disease.

During World War I, the United Kingdom used concentration camps to control those they could not or would not bring before the courts: men who had committed no offense besides belonging to the wrong nationality or ethnic group. Among these were Germans and Austrians living in Britain as well as Irish citizens suspected of disloyalty to the crown.

A century ago, no one hesitated to call concentration camps by their correct name. On December 4, 1914, for instance, the *Manchester Guardian* carried the headline "Disorder at Lancaster Concentration Camp." The article described a bayonet charge by troops to restore order among the German civilians detained in the camp.

Eighteen months later authorities opened a concentration camp in a remote part of Wales to cope with the thousands of Irish political prisoners who had been filling up British prisons. Frongoch Concentration Camp, built around a disused factory, established the pattern for the camps that began to appear all over Europe in the 1930s: a barbed wire fence circled the old buildings, and wooden



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huts were constructed to increase the camp’s capacity. Eventually Frongoch held over two thousand Irish republicans.

On March 22, 1933, the first concentration camp in Nazi Germany opened near the Bavarian town of Dachau. Like Frongoch, it consisted of a barbed wire fence around an old factory with wooden huts to house more prisoners.

Dachau’s example inspired the autocratic ruler of another country: Poland’s aging Marshal Pilsudski was, like Hitler, having problems with citizens who opposed his rule. A little over a year after Dachau opened, his regime set up a camp for those “whose activities or conduct give rise to the belief that they threaten the public security, peace, or order.” Like Dachau, the Bereza Kartuska concentration camp followed the British model: a disused building surrounded by barbed wire.

British politicians hold habeas corpus — the right not to be imprisoned without trial — in sentimental regard, claiming it as one of the United Kingdom’s core values. Their attachment to this notion reveals itself to be mere rhetoric, however, whenever habeas corpus threatens to interfere with good governance. Then, the United Kingdom ditches this right with indecent haste. The history of British concentration camps in the 1940s, when the government not only imprisoned refugees and German soldiers but also gave a foreign government

the right to organize camps on the British Isles, highlights this fundamental hypocrisy.

Collar the Lot

In June 1940, with a German invasion expected at any moment, Prime Minister Winston Churchill decided to arrest every German and Austrian in the country and send them all to concentration camps. To those who reminded him that many of these people were Jewish refugees, he responded briefly and memorably: “Collar the lot!” Of course, no one wanted to call these new institutions

“concentration camps,” so they renamed them “internment camps” to differentiate them from the Nazis’ practice. But these camps also held people indefinitely and without trial because of their nationality, ethnicity, religion and/or political beliefs. While the British camps do not begin to compare to those in Nazi Germany, they were indisputably concentration camps.

Whatever their name, the government built them to keep those the state could not permit to remain at large behind barbed wire. These new camps resembled Frongoch, Dachau, and Bereza Kartuska: the military commandeered rows of houses and built barbed wire fences around them.

In addition to German nationals — the vast majority of whom were Jews who had fled their homes to avoid a similar fate — the government arrested and held a thousand British citizens. These prisoners included a retired admiral, a member of parliament, and the former general secretary of the Women’s Social and Political Union, otherwise known as the suffragettes.

That same year, the British government allowed another country to build a running network of concentration camps in Scotland. After the fall of France in 1940, over twenty thousand Polish soldiers were evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk to Britain. The United Kingdom and Poland agreed that they would be dispatched to Scotland, charged with protecting the east coast from the German forces who had just invaded Norway.

In return, the Polish government in exile, led by General Wladyslaw Sikorski, was allowed to conduct their affairs as they saw fit. The British government treated these bases in Scotland as sovereign Polish territory.

General Sikorski feared that other exiled Polish politicians were plotting against

him, so he opened a camp at Rothesay, on the Isle of Bute, just thirty miles from Glasgow, for those he worried would threaten his authority. He made no secret of his intentions, explaining at a meeting of the Polish National Council in London on July 18, 1940, "There is no Polish judiciary. Those who conspire will be sent to a concentration camp."

Eventually, Sikorski set up half a dozen camps. Some held political prisoners, including Marian Zyndram-Koscalkowski, former Polish prime minister, and General Ludomil Antoni Rayski, former commander of the Polish Air Force. Others were reserved for "persons of improper moral character,"

including homosexuals. A large number of detainees were Jews.

The Rothesay camp was relatively easygoing, intended only to prevent discontented army officers and politicians from working against Sikorski's interests. While at Rothesay, these dissidents could not be in London attempting to challenge the general's authority.

As the number of camps increased, the newer ones started to look more like the traditional version with barbed wire fences, watchtowers, and brutal guards prepared to shoot prisoners out of hand.

Prisoners in camps such as those at Tighnabruich, Kingledoor, and Inverkeithing were certainly mistreated and occasionally murdered.

On October 29, 1940, for example, a Jewish prisoner named Edward Jakubowsky was shot dead at the camp near Kingledoor. Courts later ruled that the guard who killed him, Marian Przybylski, was using his weapon in the execution of his duties. The British police did not investigate these deaths because the Polish army had complete and unlimited authority over their own citizens in Britain.

As the war continued, some members of parliament became uneasy about the Scottish camps and began asking questions about individual cases, which invariably involved Jewish prisoners. In 1941, Samuel Silverman, the MP for Nelson and Colne, inquired about Benjamin and Jack Ajzenberg, two Jewish brothers who had been arrested by Polish soldiers in London and transported to Scotland.

Silverman asked the secretary of state for war, "How many persons are now

detained by the Polish authorities in this country under their powers under the Allied Forces Act?” He received a vague reply: the British government could not afford to alienate their ally at such an important time.

Unease about the Polish camps reached a climax in 1945. On June 15, just weeks after the end of the war in Europe, the Russian newspaper Pravda carried an article that began: The Polish Fascist concentration camp system, notorious before the Germans started Buchenwald and other camps, was preserved when the Poles fled from Poland.

An account of the abduction of Dr Jan Jagodzinski, a Jewish academic, followed. He had been spirited off to Scotland and held in the Inverkeithing concentration camp, just a few miles north of Edinburgh.

To alleviate fears, the Polish government allowed the press to visit the camp. It quickly regretted this decision: the first prisoner the writers spoke to was another Jew, and the journalists learned that a prisoner had been shot dead by one of the guards the previous week.

After World War II ended, the newly elected Labour government put pressure on the Polish authorities to close down their camps, but they stayed open as late as 1946. By that time, the British themselves had begun employing slave labor on an industrial scale, using hundreds of camps across the country to imprison workers.

Surrendered Enemy Personnel

The end of the war precipitated an agricultural crisis in the United Kingdom. As part of the government’s policy to achieve food self-sufficiency, it dedicated twice as much land to growing wheat in 1945 as in 1938.

During the war, the Women’s Land Army and schoolchildren donated their time to farming. After peace, it was unlikely that they would continue to engage in back-breaking labor for free. Without an unpaid workforce, the country could not maintain its agricultural output.

In 1945, Britain held hundreds of thousands of German prisoners at home as well as in Canada, the United States, and North Africa. In order to use them as slave labor, however, the government would have to strip them of the protections afforded by the Geneva Conventions, which Britain had signed.

So the United Kingdom changed their prisoners' status from prisoners of war to surrendered enemy personnel.

Prisoners of war must be housed and fed at least as well as their captor's own armed forces. With many thousands of prisoners working the land, this was not possible. During the harsh winter of 1945, the men transported to Britain only had tents for shelter, which would have breached international law had they been recognized as prisoners of war.

In the first postwar year, the United Kingdom brought a staggering number of men from all over the world to work the land. In May 1946, three thousand men a week were arriving in Britain and being sent off to army-protected camps. The Geneva Conventions also require prisoners of war to be repatriated as soon as hostilities cease, but it took the United Kingdom until 1948 to allow the last of the enslaved Germans to return to their own country.

Between 1945 and 1948, the Nuremberg trials prosecuted Nazi officers for crimes against humanity, including, of course, "compulsory, uncompensated labor." In 1947, the SS officers who had administered the Third Reich's slave system were tried, and a number of the defendants were subsequently hanged for their wartime activities. Judge Robert Toms said, "There is no such thing as benevolent slavery. Involuntary servitude, even tempered by humane treatment, is still slavery." At the time of this judgment, over three hundred thousand enslaved workers were bringing in the British harvest.

A Leitmotif of British History

This short article cannot further explore British concentration camps in the years between 1940 and 1948, which would include a longer discussion of the United Kingdom's decision to keep some German camps open. The Belsen concentration camp, renamed Hohne, held Jews who wished to emigrate to Palestine in defiance of British wishes. The British even built two new camps after the end of the war near the German town of Lubeck. In 1947, Am Stau and Poppendorf were crammed with Jews the British did not want leaving Europe.

The British have always held hypocritical positions when it comes to concentration camps: they are as eager as any other nation to use them while always being the first to condemn any country that sets up similar establishments.

Indeed, the United Kingdom was not only an enthusiastic concentration-camp operator, but it also tolerated another nation operating camps on British soil. This pragmatic approach to the imprisonment of men and women based only on nationality or ethnicity has been a leitmotif of twentieth-century British history.

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